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Xinjiang Horizons

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Articles on Xinjiang and the Silk Road, 2013

Urbanatomy Electronic edition, 2014

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Contents

Introduction
The Eurasian Connection
Ancient Encounters
Journeys to the West
An Urumqi Orientation
Time-Travels in Kashgar
Who are the Uyghurs?
The Xinjiang Han

Introduction

The articles collected in this volume were written during 2013, in connection with three visits to Xinjiang that were undertaken to produce the three-part series of *That's Shanghai* magazine supplements entitled *Xinjiang Horizons*. These supplements were commissioned by a PRC media organ to balance negative overseas coverage of a sensitive national topic. While complete editorial freedom was in principle assured, it should be understood that the basic orientation of this material is promotional rather than critical. It has sought, nevertheless, to be strictly honest – if, in some cases, selective.

Western readers are typically exposed to an extremely slanted perspective upon Xinjiang, substantially shaped by our contemporary conditions of great power rivalry. In so far as these articles contribute to a less one-sidedly controlled understanding of the Chinese Silk Road and its modern legacy, they will have achieved their purpose. If they are able to provide some modest provocation to further skeptical research, education, and travel, the region's fascinating, tangled, and – in very many cases – irreducibly cryptic realities will begin to speak for themselves.

Nick Land (April 2014)

The Eurasian Connection (Stages of the Silk Road)

The term 'silk road' thus refers to more than just trade in silk between China and Rome over a few centuries. It stands for the exchanges of things and ideas, both intended and accidental, through trade, diplomacy, conquest, migration, and pilgrimage that intensified integration of the Afrom-Eurasion continent from the Neolithic through modern times. Warriors, missionaries, nomads, emissaries, and artisans as well as merchants contributed to this ongoing cross-fertilization, which thrived under imperial and religious unifications. -- James A. Millward (*The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*)

Due to the Silk Road, the ancient empires of China and Rome were aware of each other over two millennia ago. The Romans knew the ‘Seres’ (Chinese) as a distant civilization, located at the eastern edge of the world, adept at the incomprehensible art of silk-making. The Chinese historians of the Han Dynasty had a reciprocal, and equally nebulous knowledge of a great western empire that they called ‘Da Qin’, a remote source of precious metals, dyes, strange plants and animals, and exotic trade goods.

Between these ultimate poles stretched the Silk Road, a tangled skein rather than a single thread, crossing fearsome deserts and mountains, at times relayed by great intermediate civilizations, at others harried and disrupted by fierce nomads, binding the Eurasian landmass into a complex commercial and cultural whole.

It was not until 1877 that the Silk Road acquired its modern, Western name, from the writings and lectures of the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (uncle of the famous ‘Red Baron’). If it is followed as silk was conveyed for distant trade, from east to west, it

began in Xi’an (known as ‘Chang'an‘ until the Ming Dynasty). It then continued through the Hexi or Gansu Corridor, to Dunhuang, at the edge of the Tarim Basin, where it split into three -- a Southern and Northern Route, traversing the foothills of the Tianshan and Kunlun Mountains respectively, and a Central Route, which crossed the harsh Taklimakan Desert (whose name means ‘those who enter never leave’). These roads re-combined at the approach to the Pamir Mountains, in the oasis city of Kashgar, before continuing west into south and central Asia, and as far as Rome.

The engine of trade is disequilibrium, or uneven distribution. That which is relatively abundant, and cheap, is conveyed to a place where it is scarce, and thus expensive. Such ‘arbitrage’ is the essence of commercial enterprise. In the case of the Silk Road, this commercial engine ran upon differences of exceptional extremity, because the agricultural bases of its eastern and western poles had arisen in mutual isolation, with distinct origins, and were thus – at the beginning – perfect strangers to each other. The Western staples, wheat and barley, had originated in the Fertile Crescent, spreading north and west into Europe. The East, in contrast, supported its population upon millet and rice.

East and West rested upon distinct agricultural foundations, and these differences were not restricted to staples. From the East, the West received sugar cane, soybeans, peaches, almonds, cinnamon, ginger, and rhubarb. In return, the East received alfalfa, fava beans (broad beans), peas, turnips, spinach, watermelons (originally from Africa), cucumbers, pomegranates, walnuts, and lichis. Radiating outwards, east and west from the center, were lemons, cotton, sesame, carrots, apples, and perhaps onions and garlic. Different citrus fruits were exchanged in both directions. The aubergine, swelling across time, from a small oval vegetable to the large tubular one we know today, traveled first west, then east, as it changed.

In strictly commercial terms, however, the most important agricultural difference was the most sophisticated, and sumptuous. This was the determined by the unique sericulture (silk cultivation) of China, and

the viniculture (grape cultivation) of the West, each entirely unknown to the other until brought into connection by the Silk Road.

Patterns of commerce could not be expected to remain consistent over the course of two millennia, but it is safe to say that the typical structure of exchange was a relay, rather than a meeting of (eastern and western) poles. China, densely populated, and short of grazing land, was ill-suited to the rearing of horses, whilst its military situation, exposed to a vast arc of fierce nomadic peoples to north and west, made access to horses an indispensable strategic requirement. For this reason, the principal exchange dominating the eastern stretch of the Silk Road involved the purchase of horses for bolts of silk. These quantities of silk were then carried westwards, through ancient empires (Kushan, Sogdian, Parthian, Persian, Abbasid, Seleucid, Roman or Byzantine, among others that rose and fell through the ages). Such chains of transaction meant that only a small minority of merchants would complete an entire journey from east to west (or inversely). Instead, commodities, rumors, customs, and ideas were propelled in stages across continuous distances that only the hardiest and boldest travelers ever crossed.

Some of those who made and recorded epic journeys have become legends, such as Zhang Qian, Xuanzang, Ibn Battuta, and Marco Polo, each an iconic figure within his respective civilization, and even beyond it. These travelers reported observations that rose above the ‘Chinese whispers’ chains of the caravans, establishing direct cultural communication between distant peoples, with dramatic, transformative effect.

The Silk Road was a thoroughfare of ideas, communicating Buddhism eastwards in China, and the ‘four great inventions’ (compass, gunpowder, paper-making, and printing) from east to west, where they would eventually lay the foundations of European (and thus global) modernity. Ideas were often incarnated in trade goods, such as the various musical instruments that were carried in both directions, fundamentally transforming the musical cultures of the civilizations they crossed. At other times they were recorded in

books, especially the religious scriptures of Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity, and Islam that reached China from the West.

Prominent among the imports that fixed the exoticism of the West in the eyes of Chinese were animals. African megafauna were no doubt the most impressive: the lion, giraffe, ostrich, and rhinoceros. From India came the peacock, accompanied by powerful cultural associations from further west, in the courts of ancient Babylonia and Persia, where it was linked to the idea of royalty. The greatest practical impact, however, belongs to the camel, another ‘western’ animal, second only to the horse in importance.

Of the commodities hungrily absorbed by Central Asian, Middle Eastern, and Western markets, blue-and-white porcelain deserves special mention. Often disdained by the Chinese literati as an object of domestic consumption, blue-and-white ware from Jingdezhen was an early export-oriented industry, eagerly collected at almost every stage of the Silk Road, and contributing decisively to the aesthetics of European Chinoiserie. Dutch and English manufacturers would eventually master the art of porcelain manufacture for themselves, but even after doing to, Chinese styles remained an indelible feature.

Beyond the dangers of the Silk Road’s forbidding terrain and fierce tribes, it had a dark side of enormous historical importance, as a conduit of plague. As the Eurasian landmass was knitted together into a commercial whole, eased towards biological equilibrium by exchanges of crops and produce, morbid diseases were released from isolation, and spread out along the great trade corridor. In these catastrophic events, no less than the benign and productive ones, the complex interactions between nomads and farmers, travelers and concentrated urban settlements, commerce and nature, were intensified by the world’s great thoroughfare, drawing the peoples of Eurasia’s eastern and western poles into a common historical experience.

Although the Silk Road never died, its influence indisputably waned, as the rising importance of maritime commerce between great port cities side-lined overland trade routes. The meaning of the Silk

Road, however, has undergone no comparable decline. It tells history in a way that foregrounds cultural communication over the distinctness of peoples, exemplifying the resilient bonds of trade across time. Above all, it tells a Eurasian story, one that cannot be broken into parts without loss of information and understanding. It was through mixture that history took place.

Zhang Qian

It might seem unrealistic to expect a phenomenon as complex as the Silk Road to have had a simple, unambiguous beginning. There is nevertheless a persuasive candidate for such an origin: the two journeys of the imperial envoy Zhang Qian, beginning in the years 138 and 119 BC.

Zhang Qian's expeditions were motivated by a search for allies against the terrifying Xiongnu, who had swept down from the Mongolian steppes to wreak havoc along China's frontiers. These journeys carried Zhang Qian as far west as modern Afghanistan, through extraordinary adventures, which included captivity in the hands of the Xiongnu, and even marriage to a Xiongnu woman. Whilst indecisive in their primary purpose, these expeditions succeeded at a far more important level, encountering civilizations to the west with which China could engage in mutually profitable exchange – giving birth to the Silk Road.

Today, Zhang Qian's achievements are celebrated by the new Shule Historical Museum, in Shule County, which tells the story of the Silk Road as it unfolded from this beginning. His statue gazes out across

the outskirts of the still-spreading Silk Road city of Kashgar, as the ancient story continues.

Ancient Encounters

It is generally agreed that the origin of modern populations in Xinjiang and Central Asia is the result of the admixture of people from the West and the East. When and where this admixture first occurred has long been of interest to geneticists and archaeologists. The year 132 BC is often considered to be the beginning of contact between the East and the West along the Great Silk Road, since the Chinese explorer Zhang Qian went westward into Central Asia at that time. However, Mair has suggested that the date should be even earlier, based on the fact that silk appeared in Europe at 1000 BC. In this study, the East and West Eurasian lineages are seen to coexist in the Xiaohe people, implying that the East had contacted the West during the early Bronze Age. It is noteworthy that the maternal lineage of five male individuals … originated from East Eurasian, whereas their paternal lineage originated from the West Eurasian, implying that the Xiaohe population had been an admixture of people from both the West and the East. Given the unique genetic haplotypes and the particular archaeological culture, This means that the time of their mingling was at least a 1000 years earlier than previously proposed. -- Hui Zhou, et al., 2010

The area corresponding to modern Xinjiang entered the historical record as a land of connections. Towards the end of the second century BC, the Chinese diplomat, traveler, and adventurer Zhang Qian passed through it, on two great journeys of exploration to the West, carefully recording his discoveries. The routes he took led to a sustained engagement with foreign civilizations, linking China through Central Asia to the Middle East and to Europe. Retrospectively, Zhang Qian's expeditions would be understood as the opening of the Silk Road, a network of intercultural communication that remains central to the identity of Xinjiang into the

present day. It was, from the beginning, a place of unexpected meetings.

Before the beginning of the Silk Road, there were older beginnings, unwritten, yet increasingly evident to scientific investigators. The earliest of these long antedates the arrival of man. Xinjiang is one of China's richest fossil sources, where abundant deposits of petrified vegetation and animal remains reach back to the late Jurassic, 150 million years ago. The Quaternary Period, during which recognizable humanoids have existed, extends for only 2.6 million years, but even this span of time dwarfs the epoch of human settlement in Central and East Asia, which has can be counted in a few tens of millennia, perhaps a total of just 40,000 years.

Plentiful evidence of a human presence in and around the Tarim Basin is more recent still. Hunter-gatherers of the Paleolithic, or 'old stone age', preceding the discovery of agriculture, were the source of the most ancient archeological remains. Evidence of their encampments, including flint tools and fires, have been found in sites that date back roughly 20,000 years. Then – suddenly – sometime over 10,000 years ago, in the twilight of the Paleolithic, these people speak to us. On the wall of a cave in Altay Dunblak, unknown artists left a red-ochre painting, vividly depicting scenes from a prehistoric hunt, in which human figures, armed with spears, pursue a panicked herd of large herbivores across the plains. Whether a recording, a magical summoning, or something else, with meaning yet undreamt, this archaic picture throws open an astounding window onto prehistory, presenting a view out across a primordial wilderness, as seen through the eyes of our distant ancestors. More than just a physical relic, it is a cultural encounter – a meeting.

As the area entered the Neolithic, with the discovery of farming, about 8,000 years ago, the accumulation of evidence accelerates, including not only tools of ever greater variety and sophistication, but also human skeletal remains, and remnants of clothing. Among the most striking archaeological treasures from this period is the Qiager Deer Stone, erected around 3,000 BC, bearing a stylized human face, and facing eastwards to align with the rising sun. This

beautifully carved stele is an early example among many found on the north-east Asian plains, serving a religious purpose for the Shamanic herders of the late Neolithic.

Even in this early period, before the influence of literate civilization, archaeological data reveal the presence of a complex mixture of peoples in the area of modern Xinjiang. In this oasis region, and natural cross-roads, pastoral and agricultural patterns of life co-existed, with both herders and farmers participating in networks of trade that connected them to more distant peoples. Jade had been established as a widely-accepted commodity by the beginning of the second millennium BC.

It was during this same period – rounded for convenience to an estimate of 1,800 BC – that a series of burials took place in the dry soil of the Tarim Basin, perfectly ordinary at the time, but found no less extraordinary at the moment of their exhumation, almost 4,000 years later. Interred in rude wooden coffins, dressed in simple clothes, these ancient bodies had been naturally dessicated by the heat and aridity of their burial grounds, in the Tianshan foothills, at the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. They were the earliest among scores of ‘Tarim Mummies’ to be found in the area, and they would expand the topic of the region’s racial complexity into a puzzle of continental scope.

Early Chinese sources, long-dismissed as merely legendary, had written of a closely-neighboring people, described as unusual tall, with blonde or reddish beards, long noses, and blue or green eyes. Beyond their intrinsic implausibility, the credibility of these accounts had been further undermined through uncertain attribution, to writers of dubious antiquity. Yet among the oldest of the Tarim Mummies were bodies that offered shocking vindication of the ancient historical records. Their features were exactly as ‘legend’ had recorded, and these ‘Europoid’ or ‘Caucasoid’ characteristics were reinforced by clothing distinctive to the western extremes of Eurasia. DNA analysis would later confirm these origins conclusively.

The most important public exhibition of Tarim Mummies is housed in a special hall of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum, in Urumqi. The collection is organized historically, arranged in a counter-clockwise circuit. Consisting of six dessicated corpses (or 'ganshi') in total, it falls into three distinct groups: three mummies from roughly 1,800 BC; two from 800 BC; and finally the much more recent – and precisely identified – mummified body of Zhang Xiong, an official whose life is a matter of historical record (lasting from AD 583-635).

Among the oldest group, the first in order of display, and the most pathetic, is the lovingly wrapped mummy of a small child, exhumed from the Gumugou burial site, near the Kongque River. The body had been interred in a straw basket, wearing a hat of wool and felt, accompanied by wooden figurines.

The second mummy is the best known, having gained iconic status as representative of the entire mysterious phenomenon – a fame whose exceptional character owes more to media whim than special scientific significance. Known internationally as the 'Loulan Beauty', this body was excavated from the Tiebanhe riverside, north of Lop-nor, in 1980. She was buried in clothes and shoes made of animal skin and cloth, along with a small grass bag, containing a comb and other everyday items. Her blood type has been identified as 'O'.

The last of the Urumqi museum mummies in the early cluster is another adult female, from the important Xiaohe site. She was interred clothed in rough textiles and animal skins, a feathered hat, and a mask, along with sundry items including medicines.

Even given some fore-knowledge about the mummies, it is difficult not to be amazed by their state of preservation. All three of these ancient dried bodies are identifiably Caucasoid upon casual inspection, as indicated by hair color alone. Their clothes – protected by wooden coffins – still look wearable, after nearly 4,000 years. From the weave of their clothing, they have been connected with inhabitants of central Europe, who used a similar, distinctive type of loom at a comparable point in early Bronze Age history. Such

evidence has led to their identification as Celts. Their place in time and space coincides with the ancient Central Asian Tocharian language, with which they have also been – cautiously – identified. The speakers of this tongue were known to the Chinese as Yuezhi. At the beginning of the first millennium, one branch of this people would found the Kushan Empire to the west and south of the Himalaya and Pamir mountains.

Recent scientific study has deepened understanding of these early mummies. In particular, exact information about the sampled early Bronze Age Tarim Basin population has been provided by meticulous genetic analysis. At the forefront of this work has been a research team led by Hui Zhou, of Jilin University, including Chunxiang Li, Hongjie Li, Yinqiu Cui, Chengzhi Xie, Dawei Cai, Wenying Li, Victor H Mair, Zhi Xu, Quanchao Zhang, Idelisi Abuduresule, Li Jin, and Hong Zhu.

Hui's team concentrated on the Xiaohe cemetery, where the oldest human remains were to be found. The Xiaohe site, situated 60km south of the Kongque River, and 175km west of Loulan, had first been discovered in 1934, by the Swedish archaeologist Folke Bergman, but amongst the turbulence of subsequent events the find had been forgotten. It was rediscovered in 2000 by the Xinjiang Archaeological Institute, employing modern GPS technology. Excavation of the site began two years later.

Several unique features of the Xiaohe cemetery distinguish it from any other site of similar age in the world. Perhaps most remarkable is the explicit connection between sex and death that is made by huge posts, accompanying each grave, graphically representing male and female genitalia, with each body being buried beneath a post of opposite sexual sign. The cultural purpose of this elaborate system is yet to be decoded. Besides human remains, the site's 167 graves contained an archaeological treasure trove of artifacts, including well-preserved textiles, and ornaments. Comparisons between these objects allowed archaeologists to divide the cemetery into distinct historical layers.

Radiocarbon measurement of the lowest (and oldest) Xiaohe stratum, conducted by Wu Xiaohong of Beijing University, dated it to between 1,930 and 2,010 BC, almost 200 years older than the next earliest Bronze Age site, at Gumugou. This level of the cemetery contained 41 graves, from which the skeletal remains of 37 human bodies were excavated during the years 2004-5 by Jilin University's Research Center for Chinese Frontier Archaeology, in collaboration with the Xinjiang Archaeological Institute. From among these remains, 30 well-preserved skeletons were selected for analysis at the university's Ancient DNA Laboratory.

The research team conducted two series of genetic tests upon the remains, designed to identify their maternal and paternal lineages. Extremely rigorous precautions were taken to avoid any contamination of the ancient bone and teeth samples, including strict sterilization and cleaning procedures, multiple extractions from each individual, double testing at different institutions, and the discarding of results when any hint of possible compromise was detected. After elimination of questionable results, DNA from the remains of 20 individuals contributed to the final analysis. The important scientific paper explaining this research and its conclusions, published in 2010, prefaces its results by remarking:

"Based on analyses of human remains and other archaeological materials from the ancient cemeteries (dated from approximately the Bronze Age to the Iron Age), there is now widespread acceptance that the first residents of the Tarim Basin came from the West. This was followed, in stages, by the arrival of Eastern people following the Han Dynasty. However, the exact time when the admixture of the East and the West occurred in this area is still obscure."

The Western genetic contribution to the ancient Xiaohe people was definitively confirmed. All of the paternal lineages were found to be of Caucasoid origin, consonant with the appearance of the oldest mummies, and with their attendant archaeological evidence. It was on the maternal side, however, that understanding was most

significantly advanced. Analysis of mitochondrial DNA – passed down exclusively through the egg, and thus the mother – found unmistakable markers of both Eastern and Western ancestry. At the beginning of the Bronze Age, the Tarim Basin population was already mixed. The authors summarize these findings:

“The Xiaohe cemetery is the oldest archeological site with human remains discovered in the Tarim Basin to date. Our genetic analyses revealed that the maternal lineages of the Xiaohe people were originated from both the East and the West, whereas paternal lineages discovered in the Xiaohe people all originated from the West.”

Over 1,500 years before the expeditions of Zhang Qian, the Tarim Basin was already a cross-roads, or junction of peoples, not only regionally, but at the most all-encompassing, continental scale. The researchers warn, however, against the assumption that the ancestral intermingling revealed by these data originally occurred in the Tarim Basin area, noting that “the time of this admixture could be much earlier than the time at which the Xiaohe people were living at the site.” Detailed examination of the genetic evidence indicates that the fusion of Eastern and Western blood-lines in the Xiaohe population could, more probably, have taken place in southern Siberia, prior to its migration to the Tarim Basin. What can be known with confidence is that it took place not much less than 2,000 years before the rise of the Han Dynasty, and very possibly much earlier still.

Following the exhibition in the mummy hall of the Urumqi museum, the story is now catapulted forward by over a millennium, and shifted in space to the burial site of Zagunluk, near Qiemo (Cherchen), yet the content of the narrative remains remarkably stable. The Qiemo mummies are dated to roughly 800 BC. Both are adults, one male and one female, dressed in deep red twill tunics, with swirling facial tattoos. The male mummy – internationally famous as ‘Cherchen man’ – sports tartan leggings. The female mummy has red painted fingernails. For reasons that are not yet understood, both were buried wearing non-matching boots.

In comparison to the earlier mummies, however, the Qiemo pair foreground the region's archaic genetic admixture far more starkly. Whilst Cherchen Man belongs recognizably to the older population, with its striking Caucasoid features, Cherchen Woman is of mixed descent, embodying a recent combination of Caucasoid and Mongoloid ancestry. She is, in this respect, an early representative of the peoples who would occupy the vast Eurasian communication zone, stretched between eastern Europe and western China, where trade goods, ideas, and bloodlines have flowed and intermingled over the millennia. Genetic analysis of both modern and ancient DNA has shown that among all the Central Asian populations, whether Uyghurs, Kazaks, Kyrgyz, or others, Caucasian and East Asian ancestries have been combined, and trans-continental communication incarnated in its carriers across the generations.

With every step taken by scientific archaeology and genetic science into the understanding of the ancient peoples of the Tarim Basin, one basic conclusion becomes ever clearer. The culture of the Silk Road long predated its recognition within literate recorded history, shaping its constituent populations at the level of their most intimate identities. The expeditions of Zhang Qian are situated at the beginning of a long history, but no less at the end of a pre-history, of at least equal, and almost certainly of much greater length. Perhaps it should not surprise us that the stories told by the history and the pre-history are to a remarkable and unmistakable extent the same.

'Evidence that a West-East admixed population lived in the Tarim Basin as early as the early Bronze Age', by Hui Zhou, of Jilin University, with Chunxiang Li, Hongjie Li, Yinqiu Cui, Chengzhi Xie, Dawei Cai, Wenying Li, Victor H Mair, Zhi Xu, Quanchao Zhang, Idelisi Abuduresule, Li Jin, and Hong Zhu, can be found online, at: http://www.biomedcentral.com/1741-7007/8/15

The Science of Ancestry

The work of Gregor Mendel, conducted in the second half of the 19th century, but unrecognized until the early 20th, demonstrated that genetic variation was discrete. Like an alphabetical script, or a numerical code, genes are written in letters (ATG and C), which allow only definite states. When genomes are mixed, they are re-combined, or re-shuffled, but never smeared. They support an edifice of scientific understanding that is ‘digital’ and exact.

When genetic science is applied to the deep historical analysis of populations, it identifies groupings defined by haplotypes, or allele clusters, in which single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) – varied DNA ‘letters’ in particular positions -- take precise values. Sampling, amplifying (or massively replicating), and then reading a distinct segment of genetic material enables it to be categorized by haplotype, and thus used to identify a haplogroup – the basic building block of human variety. Haplogroups are found throughout the genome, wherever a mutation is stabilized and reproduced, but population genetics focuses on two types, which offer special insight into ancestral lineages.

Each individual has a pair of sex chromosomes, XX (female), or XY (male). In sexual genetic recombination, therefore, the egg always donates an X-chromosome, whilst the sperm – with roughly 50% probability – donates either an X or a Y (determining the sex of the child). The Y-chromosome, therefore, is transmitted exclusively down the paternal line, from grandfather, to father, to son. The identification of Y-chromosome DNA haplogroups thus provides a genealogical map of patrilineal descent.

Because both males and females have X-chromosomes, it is not possible to read matrilineal ancestry from sex chromosomes in a comparable way. There is nevertheless an isolable genetic record of the maternal line of equivalent reliability. All animal cells contain components called ‘mitochondria’ – microscopic intracellular power-plants that produce chemical energy, among other functions.

Approximately half a billion years ago, these organelles were independent single-celled organisms (prokaryotes), which were subsequently absorbed, symbiotically, into nucleated (or ‘eukaryotic’) cells. One indication of this lost primordial autonomy is the fact that each mitochondrion contains its own genetic material, quite separate from the nuclear DNA of the host cell.

The reproduction of mitochondria is not coded in the nuclear genome, but instead proceeds independently and asexually, perpetuated through cell division. Most significantly, from the perspective of population genetics, mitochondria are passed only through the egg (not the sperm), and thus record only the maternal line.

Although extremely different in nature, therefore, Y-chromosomal DNA and Mitochondrial DNA are functionally equivalent, as tools of population forensics, since neither is compromised by genetic recombination. Unaffected by ‘noisy’ sexual reshuffling, these haplogroups register the far slower and quieter history of fixed mutations, whose order can be rigorously inferred, marking the splits and re-amalgamations of population groups over tens of thousands of years.

Quotes

The Tarim Basin in western China, positioned at a critical site on the ancient Silk Road, has played a significant role in the history of human migration, cultural developments and communications between the East and the West. It became famous due to the discovery of many well-preserved mummies within the area. These mummies, especially the prehistoric Bronze Age 'Caucasoid' mummies, such as the 'Beauty of Loulan', have attracted extensive

interest among scientists regarding who were these people and where did they come from.

Our results demonstrated that the Xiaohe people were an admixture from populations originating from both the West and the East, implying that the Tarim Basin had been occupied by an admixed population since the early Bronze Age.

Hui Zhou, et al., 2010

Several facts point to the presence of western peoples far east in Asia, such as an extinct Indo-European language (Tocharian) spoken during the latter half of the first millennium in Chinese Turkestan, the presence of mummified bodies with European facial traits in the Xinjiang region, the description of west Eurasian mitochondrial DNA lineages in Central Asia, and the suggested European affiliation of mitochondrial DNA sequences from ancient bones in an Eastern Chinese site. Besides Scythians and Sarmatians, other peoples left their influence in the area: Greeks, Chinese, Turkic tribes such as the Huns, and the Avars, Arabs, and others.

‘Admixture, migrations, and dispersals in Central Asia: evidence from maternal DNA lineages’, by David Comas, Stéphanie Plaza, R Spencer Wells, Nadira Yuldaseva, Oscar Lao, Francesc Calafell and Jaume Bertranpetit, in the European Journal of Human Genetics, February 2004

http://www.nature.com/ejhg/journal/v12/n6/full/5201160a.html

Journeys to the West

More than a hundred years later [than the conquest of Bactria by the Da Yuezhi], the prince [xihou] of Guishuang (Badakhshan) established himself as king, and his dynasty was called that of the Guishuang (Kushan) King. He invaded Anxi (Indo-Parthia), and took the Gaofu (Kabul) region. He also defeated the whole of the kingdoms of Puda (Paktiya) and Jibin (Kapisha and Gandhara). Qiujiuque (Kujula Kadphises) was more than eighty years old when he died. His son, Yangaozhen [probably Vema Tahk(tu) or, possibly, his brother Sadaskana], became king in his place. He defeated Tianzhu [North-western India] and installed Generals to supervise and lead it. The Yuezhi then became extremely rich. All the kingdoms call [their king] the Guishuang [Kushan] king, but the Han call them by their original name, Da Yuezhi. -- Chinese general Ban Yong to the Chinese Emperor (c. 125 AD), recorded in the Hou Hanshu

Religious transplantation cannot be considered an obvious oddity. Whilst among the world's great religions, those that have remained predominantly rooted in their place of origin comprise, perhaps, a slight majority, the balance tilts the other way when the number of believers is included in the account. All three of the Abrahamic faiths have been geographically unfixed, despite the magnetic influence of holy places, and rituals of pilgrimage. They have spread, or been scattered, far beyond their lands of birth, and – in the cases of Christianity and Islam at least – established themselves firmly in the lives of very different peoples to those that gave birth to them.

Among the great religions of South and East Asia, however, a comparative geographical and national immobility is the norm. Since arising in the mid-2nd millennium BC, the Vedic religion of Hinduism has remained overwhelmingly confined to the Indian subcontinent

and the people who live there. The two eldest of China's ancient 'Three Teachings' (Confucianism and Daoism) – both consolidated during the Spring and Autumn, and Warring States periods (722-221 BC) -- have shown similarly spatial and ethnic constancy, firmly attached for millennia to the sphere of Han civilization. Buddhism alone has been a migrant.

Born in India during the same 'Axial Age' epoch -- in the middle of the 1st millennium BC – which saw the emergence of China's native religious traditions, Buddhism was transformed from a predominantly South Asian religion, to a predominantly East (and South-East) Asian one, over the course of the ensuing fifteen hundred years. In India, it was steadily supplanted by the Vedic religion spreading from the subcontinent's north-west, whilst it spread in turn, through Central Asia into China, and ultimately further -- into Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Central to this extraordinary journey was the Silk Road, connecting East and West along three main routes, extending across today's Xinjiang.

The most vital period of Buddhist cultural transmission extended from the later years of the Han Dynasty through to the Tang, from roughly the beginning of the first millennium AD to the 8th century, by which time Buddhism had been deeply entrenched as a Chinese religion. During the early centuries of the millennium, the Silk Road linked China directly to the Kushan Empire (AD 30-375), whose territories – at their greatest extent – stretched from the Tarim Basin in the east to Balochistan in the west, and deep into modern India to the south.

During the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25-220), relations between the Chinese and Kushans (or Guishuang) were initially competitive, but they settled into a generally cooperative mode as both empires combining their efforts against the menace of the ferocious Xiongnu. China was advantaged by the quality of its officials, especially its Protector of the Western Regions, Ban Chao (AD 32-102), whose adept handling of diplomatic and military affairs secured Chinese hegemony (or Kushan tributary deference) over the Tarim Basin and beyond. These newly- connected civilizations ushered in a period of

cultural and commercial flourishing along the eastern Silk Road, which now stretched through contiguous competent administrations all the way from China's Jiangnan region to Europe in the West and – more importantly for the purposes of this story – into the Buddhist heartlands of the Indian subcontinent. Of the cultural traffic passing in all directions along these great trade routes during the early centuries of the first millennium AD, the most deeply consequential -- by far -- was Buddhism.

In Xinjiang today, the historical stratum deposited by Kushan influence in the Tarim Basin is remembered as the 'Qiuci' culture, which outlasted the Kushan Empire itself by many centuries. The complexity of this heritage is extraordinary. Its warp and weft were provided by an intricate entanglement of East and West, interweaving of the region's Han Chinese administrative and commercial infrastructure with the Tocharians (or Yuezhi). The latter included Hellenic vestiges from the Central Asian adventures of Alexander the Great; powerful Indic currents from the sprawling southern stretches of the Kushan Empire, and an admixture of ingredients accreted from the northern steppe nomads, among other transients. Binding these elements together were two over-riding common interests, one negative, the other positive: Fear of the dreaded Xiongnu, and the nurturing streams of trade and communication flowing along an unbroken Silk Road.

Ancient religions of the West – Zoroastrianism and Nestorian Christianity – have left their traces in the areas of Kushan influence, alongside Confucian and Daoist signs and themes from the East, but the characteristic religion of the Qiuci Culture was Mahayana Buddhism, poised on its great historical journey from India to China. Silk Road merchants, whose dependence upon honesty and civil intercourse attracted them to Buddhism and the high ethical standards it induced, financially supported its propagation, sponsoring the construction of monasteries, temples, art works, and scholarly endeavors. In consequence, the 'Western Regions' – north and south of the Tianshan – became the site of an immense cultural

translation process, as the sacred writings of Buddhist India were adapted to new scripts and tongues. A unique artistic tradition of architecture, sculpture, and murals was disseminated east along the Silk Road from the Kushan-Indic world – a path that is acknowledged in its modern name ‘Serindian’.

The earliest reliable evidence of Buddhist translation into Chinese dates back to the middle of the second century AD. The earliest were Theravada scriptures translated by the Parthian monk An Shigao in AD 148, quickly followed by Mahayana scriptures by his layman colleague An Xuan. During the second half of the century, the trickle of translated scriptures became a flood, mostly due to the efforts of Parthian and Kushan monks, whilst the Mahayana influence became increasingly predominant. In the lands where the Qiuci culture thrived, huge temples, monasteries, and devotional cave complexes were constructed, but Buddhism extended far more deeply into China, spreading along the Silk Road into the great commercial centers of the interior, before diffusing more wisely among the Han people.

From the end of the 4th century a remarkable reversal becomes apparent, as Chinese Buddhist monks begin to follow the Silk Road on ‘journeys to the West’ in search of original sources. Of these pilgrim-scholars, the first to win general renown was Faxian (AD 337-422), whose two decades of travel took him through India as far as Sri Lanka, as recorded in his travelogue A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Faxian of his Travels in India and Ceylon in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline. Distrustful of existing translations, Faxian sought to recover the original scriptures in order to scrupulously amend and annotate the Chinese Buddhist canon. Two-hundred and sixty years later, the same purpose would still seem urgent enough to motivate his even more famous successor, Xuanzang.

Xuanzang (AD 602 - 664) had been indelibly memorialized as the symbol of the Buddhist Silk Road even before the appearance of the

classic novel Journey to the West at the end of the 16th century. His scholarly accomplishments completed the foundations of the Chinese Buddhist tradition as it has continued to the present day, whilst raising its philosophical articulation to the unprecedented level of coherence and subtlety found in the Yogacara school (or Weishi zong).

Xuanzang was born Chen Hui, in the Silk Road city of Luoyang. His father was a magistrate in the declining Sui Dynasty, and his upbringing was traditionally Confucian. His extraordinary gifts soon manifested themselves, however, along with a profound attraction to Buddhism, and he was ordained as a monk at the early age of 20 (in 622). The Sui Dynasty had fallen four years before, and the Tang Emperor Taizong – perhaps the greatest in China's history – now sat upon the Imperial throne. By 629 Xuanzang's studies had proceeded so far that the inadequacy of the available Yogacara (or 'mind only') scriptures had become an intolerable impediment. He set out on an historic religious and scholarly pilgrimage that would last for over 15 years.

Traveling through Gansu and Qinghai provinces, Xuanzang crossed the Gobi Desert into today's Xinjiang in 630, passing through the cities of Kumul (modern Hami), Turpan, Yanqi, Kucha, and Aksu, before crossing the Tianshan through the Bedel Pass, heading northwest into modern Kyrgyzstan. His journey then took him through much of Buddhist Central Asia – now dominated by the Empire of the Hephthalites or 'White Huns' (408-670) -- and from there into northern India, where Buddhism was already in decline. On these travels he underwent religious training under Buddhist masters, engaged in philosophical discussion, read, transcribed, and collected manuscripts, and visited holy sites, including the birthplace of the Buddha. His return journey led him back through the Tarim Basin cities of Kashgar and Khotan, then through Dunhuang, to the Tang capital of Chang'an.

On his return, with 657 Sanskrit texts and a large collection of sacred relics, the Emperor invited him into Imperial service. Xuanzang declined the offer, in order to pursue his scholarly mission of

translation and writing without interruption. Under his guidance, no less than 1,300 scriptures were translated into Chinese. In addition, Xunazang authored the religious classic Cheng Weishi Lun (or Discourse on the Establishment of Mind Only), as well as the critically important historical, geographical, and ethnographic work Great Tang Records on the Western Regions.

By the time of his death Xuanzang was already recognized as a cultural hero, and a special edifice -- the Xingjiao Monastery -- was constructed as a house for his ashes. Buddhism was now an adopted religion, and a Silk Road religion, with a center of geographical and demographic gravity that had shifted irreversibly, on a continental scale. Despite tribulations ahead, it had consolidated a perennial place among China's Three Teachings (or Sanjiao). It would be the most significant traveler to ever cross the mountains and deserts of today's Xinjiang, heading east.

Some Streams of Buddhist Thought

Theravada is the oldest surviving Buddhist tradition, dating back to the third century BC. Geographically and canonically, it passed through Sri Lanka and the Pali language, attaining a more rationalistic form. The Pali Canon emphasizes the 'three characteristics' of impermanence (Anicca), suffering (Dukha), and non-self (Anatta).

Much of the early Mahayana (or 'Great Vehicle') doctrine has been reconstructed from Chinese sources, and its origins remain obscure. It is especially associated with the Lotus Sutra, written around the beginning of the first millennium. Mahayana scriptures (sutras) have a distinctive practical emphasis, oriented to meditative discipline.

Yogacara (or 'mind-only') is a highly philosophical strand of Mahayana Buddhism, focused upon the recognition and dispelling of delusion. It has made an especially rich contribution to Chinese

intellectual culture, strongly influencing the Neo-Confucian metaphysics of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Clarification of Yogacara was the principal motivation for Xuanzang’s journey to the West.

The Kizil Caves

Situated in Baicheng County, in an area of harsh rugged desert, the Kizil Caves have to be counted among the most important cultural heritage sites in the world. A total of 236 chambers were dug into the cliff-side over the course of five hundred years, from the 3rd – 8th century AD, of which two thirds were monastic cells (vihara). One hundred and thirty-five of the caves remain today (with 80 containing murals). Twelve are open to the public.

Despite undergoing several periods of destruction, many of the exquisite murals are still in a good condition, their contents varying from repetitive motifs to intricate narrative imagery, drawn especially from the influential Jataka tales, but including auspicious animals, Tocharian inscriptions, and even Hellenic deities. Typically, a central pillar divides each chamber into two parts, with the circumambulation of this column serving as an act of devotion.

The Subashi Ruins

Located 23km to the northwest of Kucha, in an area of broken, desert wilderness that was once irrigated by the Kucha River, the Subashi Ruins attest to the imposing public presence enjoyed by Buddhism during the flourishing of the Qiuci culture. The site is divided into an eastern and western part, with the latter open to visitors.

From the 7th – 10th century AD the site was occupied by a temple complex of astounding scale, designed in the Gandhara style. The eroded remains still powerfully convey a sense of its original magnificence and glimpses of its architectural form. Some of the surviving walls, consisting of adobe coated masonry, are three meters thick, and even in their shattered state jut upwards to a height of almost 11 meters.

An Urumqi Orientation

Tourist travel has long recognized its paradoxes. Operating as a driving force of modernization and development, it nevertheless often caters to people in momentary flight from comfortable modern lives, into ‘unspoilt’ worlds of underdevelopment and exotic strangeness. Not uncommonly, tourists hope to reach places that tourism has not reached.

This internal contradiction need not be paralyzing. The forms of natural, architectural, and cultural heritage through which places differentiate and individuate themselves usually draw their most reliable sustenance from tourist-driven development. Once the modern world has touched any place, challenging traditions in various ways, the appreciation of visitors can be the sole effective key to survival. Nevertheless, regardless of whether their paradoxical desires are conscious or – more typically – unconscious, tourists rarely travel in search of tourism, or the comforts of familiarity in distant places.

For leisure visitors from elsewhere in China, whether foreign or local, Xinjiang’s capital of Urumqi brings such tensions into focus, because the city so obviously reaches out to meet them. In Urumqi, Xinjiang’s strangeness seems to have been moderated, by the progress of modernity, the province’s most advanced architecture, frictionless communications, recognizable media references, and the large-scale, softening flows of people. Here is a young, internationalized, thriving metropolis, convenient and at least partially familiar, somehow set apart from the impenetrable ancient mysteries of China’s deep west.

Yet if Urumqi refuses to be difficult, or withdrawn, it does not decline to be different. Its citizens are as eager to explain their city, and its uniqueness, as those of any other in the world. When they do, within the first two sentences, they will connect it to the Silk Road, as to an

ultimate, all-explaining, and continuing tradition. By leaning forwards and outwards, reaching eagerly beyond itself, Urumqi is not compromising a more original, authentic identity, but is rather re-dedicating itself to the time-tested openness that has made it what it is.

What is it, though? The best source of initial orientation is to be found in the city's Hongshan Park, elevated above the hubbub of its busy streets, and providing an overview of the downtown area. The highest point of the small 'red mountain' is occupied by a modest pagoda, built of painted bricks, which is associated with a local legend about a celestial dragon race across the sky. Guard-rails on the approach bear signs that gently warn climbers to "cherish your life, no crossing", but the small cliffs, whilst offering sufficient elevation for a view out over the city, are not precipitous enough to instill genuine terror. (Perhaps that is why the warnings are necessary.)

Situated near the pagoda stands a statue of Lin Zexu, China's esteemed 19th century drug-warrior, who was dispatched to the west following the first Opium War. Lin wrote a poem about Hongshan that is appreciative to the point of rapture, fixing his attachment to the spot immemorially.

A still more thorough orientation in both space and time is to be found from, and in, the nearby 'Overlooking Tower' -- a three-story viewing platform, brightly decorated in traditional Chinese style. The tower's balconies offer interrupted 360-degree views across the surrounding city, whilst its interior serves as display space for a small but informative urban development museum, containing a mixture of recent and historic photos as well as two engrossing scale models of the city (on the second and third floors), showing how it was constructed and arranged in 1947, and then bringing the same area – which is now Urumqi's downtown center – up to the present day.

Further historical comparison, more tightly focused upon the changes over the forty years from 1968-2008, is provided by a series of twinned photographs, depicting various parts of Urumqi as they

appeared during the Cultural Revolution, and towards the end of the 21st century's first decade. Such photographs are a staple of Chinese urban development exhibitions, but this does not detract from the graphic message they convey. Given that Urumqi was something of a backwater until very recent times, the distance traveled over these four decades is especially remarkable, and fascinating to observe in detail.

In 1947, during the final years of the Republican period (Minguo), Urumqi was still called Dihuashi (or 'the city of enlightenment'). This was the name it had been given in 1763 by the Qing Emperor Qianlong, following the defeat of the (Mongol) Dzungar Khanate in the first of his Ten Great Campaigns (1755-59). It was not until 1954 that it received its modern name of Urumqi (which means 'beautiful pasture' in the Dzungarian dialect). The development exhibition suggests another name as well -- 'Yanxin' (the 'central city of Asia'), serving as a regional hub with extensive outlook and reach.

Like other cities rooted in deep commercial traditions, Urumqi is distinguished by exceptional cosmopolitan openness, warm acceptance of strangers, tolerance of difference, and cultural complexity. This is most immediately evident in its remarkable ethnic diversity. Its population of 3.11 million is roughly 75% Han Chinese. Of the remainder, slightly more than half are Uyghur, with the rest consisting of Hui (8%), Kazakhs, Manchu, Mongols, Xibe, Russians, Tu, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Zhuang, Tartars, Tibetans, Dong, Miao, Koreans, and others. Visitors and newcomers are quickly made to feel at home, surrounded by sojourners and recent migrants, amidst a network of distant connections. Among Chinese cities, perhaps only Shenzhen is as instantly receptive to new residents, and as willing to define itself flexibly through those who choose to dwell there, thickening its wide-flung social web.

It is a cliché that multicultural societies first express themselves through their restaurants, but clichés are typically crystallized truths. Urumqi's gastronomy has no dominant center, but instead weaves a multiplicity of culinary traditions together, upon a frame determined by basic geographical conditions. China's comparatively arid western

regions are a land of wheat fields rather than rice paddies, so it is only to be expected that bread and noodles have been taken to heart as the dietary staples. Nan bread is universally embraced as a Xinjiang icon, and each of Urumqi's myriad culinary cultures has its own varieties of signature noodle dish, typically built upon the foundations of thick white lamian, either mixed, topped, or served together with a tomato-based sauce. Where arable land gives way to thinner pasture, it provides grazing for cows and sheep. The resulting prominence of beef and – especially – lamb in the local diet fits together neatly with the religious precepts of Xinjiang's many Muslim minorities (Uyghur, Hui, and others). Plates of steaming lamb, prepared simply, are common to Xinjiang feasts of all kinds, and considered a regional classic beyond ethnic ownership.

As might be expected from a center of regional trade, Urumqi hums to the rhythms of exchange, throughout its dense concentration of shops, malls, commercial exhibition spaces, and markets of all kinds. For the city's most concentrated celebration of living Silk Road culture, however, there is only one place to go: the Xinjiang International Grand Bazaar

The Grand Bazaar consists of four main buildings, each hosting several stories of active shopping space. Opened in 2003, it is the largest international market in Asia, with Fridays and Sundays as the busiest days. Its modern structures have been given a Central Asian traditional feel, expressed through decoratively-patterned ochre brickwork, displayed most conspicuously upon the central 80-meter viewing tower, with its minaret-style design, and giant ornamental bronze teapots at ground level. A mosque at the eastern edge of the bazaar occupies a floor above the arts and crafts market.

Urumqi's sense of time is complex, weaving deep and diverse traditions together with enthusiastic modernization. This, too, is no doubt a Silk Road inheritance, with all of its apparent paradoxes, extended back over many millennia, yet always reaching out beyond the horizon. In the Grand Bazaar this tangle of time forms knots of unusual intensity, binding ancient aesthetics to giant video screens, and supermarkets to craft stalls. Carrefour coexists with a myriad of

small vendors, selling textiles, scarves, rugs, knives, dried fruits, teas and traditional medicines, and with a Turkish market that specializes in commodities sourced from the western end of the old Silk Road. Such differences shrink towards insignificance, however, relative to the most distinctive items on sale in the Bazaar: chunks of fossilized wood, some over 150 million years old, yet so precisely metamorphosed into stone that the fine detail of their original organic structure is still clearly discernible. The most exquisite specimens sell for over RMB 3 million.

The Grand Bazaar is Urumqi's most popular leisure destination, surrounded by a nebula of attractive shops and restaurants, especially on the north side. The impressive representation of Turkish goods in the Bazaar has encouraged the emergence of a cluster of Turkish restaurants and boutiques in the nearby streets, prized amongst those in the know for their authenticity.

The culture of Urumqi finds its most creatively self-reflective expression in the city's new art hub of Qifang Jie. Opened in 2009, with 14 studios occupying a 1,000 sqm site, it has grown rapidly to encompass 81 studios, in an area that has expanded to almost 10,000 sqm. Local government and media combined to support the site as a flagship for creative industries. It has branched out from visual arts production to include a music studio – the Qifangjie Original Music Base, launched in 2012 – as well as space dedicated to art classes and exhibitions.

Among the scores of artists working at Qifang Jie, certain patterns emerge. Edgy provocation is general eschewed, and well-meaning, highly multi-cultural, often light-hearted styles prevail, drawing heavily on both fine-art and craft traditions. Xinjiang variations on Shanshui landscape art and calligraphy are a running theme through many studios, including those of Xie Xinglu and Liu Chang. Sun Lixin applies traditional Chinese aesthetics to local fruits (melons, grapes, and persimmon). Shan Xiumei makes detailed cloth dolls, exploring ethnic variety of costume and custom. Wang Zhongmin uses clay sculpture to explore Uyghur architecture. Wang Ge's paper cuttings depict iconic scenes from Communist, Buddhist, Islamic, and

Confucian sources. Jiang Geng mixes colored sand from ground up beads onto his palate to re-work images familiar from the European grandmasters. Xinjiang's most renowned photographer, Li Xueliang, also has a studio at the site.

Reflective culture of another kind finds its home in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Museum, one of China's most treasured public institutions, dating back to 1953. The museum has occupied its present site since 1962, and includes 11,000 sqm of display space. Its collection is historically and ethnographically focused, based on an almost overwhelming mass of evidence from the peoples of the Silk Road dating back into deepest antiquity. Exhibits include ancient tools, utensils, weapons, coins, clothing, artworks, and documents, sufficient to present a rich narrative from the Paleolithic through to modern times. Its most famous exhibition, however, is the collection of naturally dessicated bodies – or Tarim Mummies – which have revolutionized the understanding of the region's ancient history (see separate article).

If Urumqi's modernity and accessibility detract from its exoticism, its restless curiosity and appetite for communication offer a substitute, because this is a city that is itself in search of the exotic, whether in distant places or times. From its very beginnings, the existence of Urumqi has been inseparable from a process of exploration, directed out along threads of trade, back into a multitude of traditions, and forwards into the prospects of development. Its visitors have always worked with it, to make it what it is. And what it is? That is something it is still exploring.

Weather Reports

Urumqi has certain peculiarities which locals explain with a mixture of pride and amusement. One of these is its disproportionate elongation on a north-south axis, which is so marked that stories flourish of dramatic weather variation between its two ends. Friends

located at opposite poles of the city might discover, over the course of a lively phone conversation, that one is enjoying bright sunshine whilst the other is trudging through the snow. Seasonal weather variation is, of course, more predictably extreme, with temperatures differing by as much as 30 degrees above and below zero over the course of the year.

Getting About

Urumqi's most advanced public transport service is provided by its three-line BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) system, whose shelters – instantly recognized due to their space-age designs – are scattered throughout the urban downtown. Work on the Urumqi metro began this year, and is scheduled to become operational by 2015.

Time-Travels in Kashgar

Long before it had grown to the size of a city and acquired its old name of Shule, in the final centuries of the first millennium BC, Kashgar was already a meeting place. Situated at the western edge of the Tarim Basin, between the Pamir Mountains and the Taklimakan Desert, this oasis settlement was for over two millennia the principal junction-box through which Chinese civilization plugged itself into the commercial and diplomatic arteries of Central Asia and the world beyond. By the time it became known to the world as ‘Kashgar’, from 860 AD, its origins as a simple Silk Road caravan stop lay well over a thousand years in its past. It had become one of the great cultural hubs of the Eurasian landmass, defined by what it brought together, a cosmopolitan city of thriving bazaars, crowded inns, famed schools, and exquisite mosques. It was a place where East met West, and where ancient mysteries met ambitions of fortune and discovery. Suspended between a dazzling heritage and the complexities of modernizing development, these memories and dreams live on in the Kashgar of the present day.

By modern Chinese standards, today’s Kashgar is a small city, with a metropolitan population of just 300,000, a figure that only rises to two million when all of its eleven surrounding counties are included. The historic center is quite dense, and invitingly walkable, which allows determined explorers to familiarize themselves with its general features in no more than a few days. For most visitors, the roughly east-west axis from the Grand Bazaar, through the heart of the old town, past the night market and Id Kah Mosque, and along Ostangboyi Road, provides the most concentrated array of attractions. A meandering walk on this route, less than five kilometers in length, suffices to provide an impressive sense of the historic city, which a small number of targeted excursions can enrich.

There is no doubt some truth to the common assumption that the rise of maritime commerce since the European Renaissance cast the overland caravan routes of the Silk Road into eclipse. To those visiting Kashgar's Grand Bazaar, however, the limits of this assumption are immediately evident. The Silk Road never died. Perhaps it never even slept. Squint only slightly, and the merchants of today are nearly lost amongst the teeming ghosts of their predecessors, drawing traders from every corner of the earth to settle on prices for fabrics, carpets, blankets, curtains, scarves, shawls, hats, furs, prayer rugs, craft goods, spices, teas, medicines, dried fruit, nuts, and a myriad other commodities, as they have for countless centuries before. Immersed in a subtly ordered chaos of colors, textures, aromas, and conversations, Kashgar's merchants perpetuate their city's principal tradition with unselfconscious fidelity.

To the west of the Grand Bazaar, across the Tuman River, lies the Old Town, concentrated in space, but divided by development style. Each of its three major sections follows a distinct path towards reconciliation with modernity. The first to be encountered is at once the most 'pristine' and manifestly the least resilient, deliberately isolated from the main currents of Kashgar's urban development, so that it constitutes a small island of antiquity.

Gao Tai, set upon a low hill beside East Lake (Donghu), even looks like an island. It consists of a tightly-packed jumble of winding lanes and modest dwellings, dating back many centuries, which are home to roughly a thousand families. The buildings, constructed in traditional fashion from bricks and mud, are enchantingly exotic – evoking a distance in space and time that foreign visitors find utterly captivating. Overhanging rooms form ramshackle bridges across the laneways, adding to the sense of cavernous intimacy. Many of the doors have two bells, with one dedicated solely to unaccompanied women (to defend against violations of purdah). Other than the occasional motor-scooter, there is little to suggest that this historic enclave is part of a modern city.

Yet the same features that impress outsiders with their unspoiled authenticity can seem stranded in time to local inhabitants, whose old dwellings are challengingly under-served by modern amenities, commercial opportunities, or even a workable model for tourism revenue. The skilled local artisans, working in crumbling structures under what must be stunningly difficult conditions, gently lament the shortage of customers for their hats, pots, and other crafts. Plans to charge an entrance fee to the site were scrapped when the deterrent effect proved excessive, and there seems no obvious way to provide occasions for tourist spending without changing the area beyond recognition. With the eyes of a conservation-sensitive world focused upon Gao Tai, the search for an uncontroversial balance between local development aspirations and heritage protection is unlikely to be easy, and the way forward remains unclear.

Directly across the road from Gao Tai, reconstruction overwhelms preservation, and a new old town is emerging, with completion of the project expected by the end of 2013. For any visitor from Shanghai, comparison with that city's Xintiandi development is inescapable, since here too a modern recapitulation of local cultural and architectural heritage is being married to systematic gentrification, with social and economic revitalization set as an explicit goal. Abundant tri-lingual signage offers succinct explanation of local sights, styles, and historical associations, whilst dining and refreshment spots mark out the area as a leisure destination, overlooked by a magnificent new hotel (constructed in an exuberantly traditional style) situated upon the dominating hill.

The main thoroughfare of this area is Areya Road, named after a riverside cliff, where people sought refuge from the flooding Tuman River during the Shule state period. Compared to the picturesque hovels of Gao Tai, the buildings lining Areya Road are sturdy, spacious, comfortable, and comprehensively renovated. Their dialog with tradition takes place through fabulous decorative facades, whose intricate brick tessellations, carved arches, delicate woodwork, and ornamental doors often accounted for more than half of the total construction cost. Craft shops and restaurants occupy the

ground floor, with a further story or two of living quarters above, including a number of remarkably opulent apartments. An ‘Old-style inn’ celebrates Silk Road hospitality.

Areya Road is intersected by Kazanqiyabesi Road, whose name commemorates a young hero who slew a troublesome river devil in an iron work. This legend motivates a metallic theme, elaborated by an imposing anvil sculpture at the nearby crossroads, and by a cluster of blacksmith shops, making door ornaments, farming implements, tools, and kitchen utensils.

A heading west, along and beyond the restored section of Areya Road, leads into a maze of atmospheric lanes, scattered architectural treasures, spice vendors, and backstreet life, connecting to Kashgar’s small but delightful ‘Hambasri’ night market. Rows of overflowing snack stalls and shops line the street, selling bread fresh from the oven, a dizzying variety of wraps and pastries, skewers, and fruit. Set back a little from the hubbub, many of the city’s most beautiful buildings are to be found here, and further west, along Ostangboyi Road. Patiently awaiting the ambiguities of redevelopment, these dignified, balconied, dingily colorful, and gracefully dilapidated structures are saturated with history and the sense of place. Some serve as tea-houses, allowing visitors to bask at leisure in their quiet grandeur, and in the colorful tumult below.

Directly across from the night market, across a busy street (use the underpass), stretches Id Kah Square, dominated by the largest mosque in China. This is the best place in Kashgar to encounter a camel or two, to absorb the city’s unique atmosphere, and to delight in its finest architectural prospects. It is also a place to stop for a meal, or just a pot of delicious Xinjiang tea, whilst watching the life of the city drift past beneath, from the top floor of the much-loved Mengyol restaurant (neither the sharp, creamy yogurt, nor the ‘Mengyol special tea’ is to be missed by any sane visitor).

After the very different qualities of Gao Tai and Areya Road, the third urban flavor of Kashgar’s old city – already sampled in the night market – extends directly off Id Kah Square, along Ostangboyi Road

(Wusitangboyi Lu). Far more vitally commercial than Gao Tai, and far less thoroughly reconstructed than Areya Road, it is here that Kashgar traditions seem to have settled most comfortably into their natural equilibrium.

Ostangboyi Road consists of two main stretches, connected at an angle, with its heart at the junction. Where the road's east-west and (roughly) north-south sections meet, its architectural splendors reach a climax amongst some of the city's most ravishing scenes. This is also the place where most of the road's small restaurants, tea houses, and snack stalls cluster, offering the perfect excuse to linger. The final (north-south) section of the road is less architecturally distinguished, but it is packed with the attractions of a 'craft street' including wood and metal workshops, and purveyors of carpets, hats, clothes, jewelry, teapots, furniture, dried fruit, nuts, honey, snacks, spices, and medicines. Perhaps the most engaging of these small shops are the two (identically named) 'Uyghur musical instrument factories' – near neighbors on the eastern side of the road – where a range of astonishing handmade musical instruments are proudly displayed. Two small mosques serve the devotional needs of the local population.

Kashgar is a city undergoing rapid development, and far more is happening there than an exploration of the Old Town will discover. For anybody focused upon the distinctive identity of this astounding city, however, its Old Town – still suffused with the spirit of the Silk Road -- is the obvious place to begin.

The Livestock Market

Over the course of history, the exemplary Silk Road transaction has been an exchange of silks from China's Jiangnan region for Central Asian horses. Naturally enough, therefore, the trade in animals was a long-established business in the city's Grand Bazaar. As this trade became more tightly localized, its downtown location was reduced to a bothersome anachronism, and it was moved to a site of its own, at Dolatbagh village, eight kilometers to the north-west.

Although trading is now conducted primarily among local herders, farmers, and butchers, it remains crucially important to the city, and scarcely less attractive to casual visitors (who attend in significant numbers). Animals are brought from all of Kashgar's 12 counties to the market, where sheep, cattle, horses, donkeys, and even camels are bought and sold for breeding, transport, and food. At least 5,000 animals are traded each market day.

Ordinarily, a sheep will change hands for roughly RMB 2,000, but an especially distinguished animal – marked out by a 'high nose' -- can fetch over 1,000 times as much. One terrible story circulating in the market concerned an unfortunate animal-breeder, who – it was said -- had purchased an exceptionally fine sheep for no less than RMB6 million. The very next day this woolly treasure died of disease. The buyer and his wife, utterly ruined, were so broken in spirit that they soon followed the beast to their graves.

The Id Kah Mosque

China's largest mosque is also one of the most ancient in the world. The main structure dates back to 862 Hegira (1442 AD), but some parts are over 400 years older. Nearly 10,000 worshippers are readily accommodated in the 16,800-square-meter structure, but on special occasions, such as the festival of Ramadan, numbers swell to over 20,000 and spill onto the square outside.

The building is constructed in colorful yellow brick, with the main gate flanked by twin minarets. The inner courtyard contains two towers (‘Attics’) from which the Muezzin deliver the call for prayers. Respectful visitors are welcomed.

The Afak Khoja Mausoleum

The tomb of revered Sufi teacher Abakh Khoja is an essential stop on any Kashgar itinerary. Built in 1640, it is reputedly the resting place for 72 members of the Abakh family, although only 58 tombs are found there. The structure includes the largest domed roof in Xinjiang (29 meters in height, 35 meters in width). It is luxuriously decorated in colored tiles, each unique.

The Emperor Qianlong visited the mosque in 1795, ordering its thorough renovation, and meeting the young descendant of Abakh Khoja, Iparhan, the legendary ‘fragrant concubine’ Xiang Fei (who became Qianlong’s favorite). Xiang Fei instructed that upon her death she should be returned to Kashgar for burial. Her funerary carriage is still on display in the mausoleum.

Who are the Uyghurs?

The early history of the Uyghurs is uncertain, but by tradition, language, and genetic evidence they are known to be a Turkic people whose distinct identity was consolidated during the mid-7th century, in what is today the south-western part of the PRC’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Over three-quarters of the present day Uyghur population still inhabit the arid Tarim Basin,

ringed by the Tianshan, Pamir, Karakoram, and Kunlun mountain ranges, and dominated by the fearsome Taklamakan Desert. Although Buddhist in ancient times, the Uyghurs have been strongly identified with their Sunni Islam faith for over a thousand years.

The culture of the Uyghurs has been inseparable from the Silk Road that traverses their homeland, and this is reflected in the absorption of hybrid elements, with the Persian influence being especially pronounced. Uyghur culture has integrated the Persian New Year festival of Nowruz, which is celebrated enthusiastically every year on March 21 with feasts, sports, and musical performances. Both ancient and modern Uyghur architectural styles exhibit distinct Persian characteristics.

The Uyghur people proudly install themselves within an intellectual tradition that flourished most gloriously during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the Han Chinese were experiencing the parallel golden age of the Song Dynasty. It was during this time that the great scholars Mahmud al-Kashgari and Yusuf Khass Hajib wrote works whose brilliance remains undimmed.

Modern Uyghur literature continues to inspire readers throughout the region. Among the most respected names are Zunun Kadir (1911-1989); Abdurehim Tileshup Otkur (1923-1995); Zordun Sabir (1937-98); Memtimin Hoshur (1944-); and Ahtam Omar (1963-).

Uyghur classical music also enjoys a renown extending well beyond Xinjiang itself. The Uyghur musical canon or ‘Twelve Muqam’ was compiled by the concubine Amanni Shahan of the Yerqiang kingdom (1526-1560), preserving and relaying an art that would be recognized by UNESCO (in 2005) as part of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Mahmud al-Kashgari Mausoleum

Mahmud al-Kashgari (1005-1102) is considered the greatest Uyghur sage, famed for his Grand Turkic Dictionary, in which the language, poetry, and even geography of the ancient Turkic peoples of Central Asia is recorded. His tomb is located in a beautiful park outside Kashgar, atop a forested hill. According to legend, this spot was decided early in his life. He had been told that his final resting place would be decided by a twig taking root. Ayi Ayi Tierek, the tree that fulfils that prophecy, is still alive, growing from a small spring.

Yusuf Khass Hajib Mausoleum

Yusuf Khass Hajib (1019-1085), author of the Kutadgu Bilig, known in Chinese as the Fulezhihui or in English as ‘The Wisdom that brings Happiness’, is esteemed second only to Mahmud al-Kashgari among Uyghur scholars. His book teaches the way to apply the mind to human flourishing, and its immediate renown earned him the honorific ‘Khass Hajib’ meaning chancellor or ‘special advisor to the king’. His tomb today is among the most beautiful buildings in the region, its calm white cloisters and sophisticated acoustics attesting to its history as a place of learning and to the life of a teacher exalted there in calligraphy as ‘The Greatest Uyghur Philosopher’.

The Xinjiang Han

The population of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region consists of a mosaic of peoples, none of which constitute an absolute majority on its own. The two largest groups – Uyghur and Han – each represent something over 40% of the total. While both are found throughout the region, they are distributed unevenly. Of the world's Uyghurs, 80% live in the Tarim Basin, to the south of the Tianshan mountain range, in an area dominated by the harsh Taklimakan Desert. The heartland of the Xinjiang Han, in contrast, lies in the adjacent – and far milder -- Dzungarian Basin, across the Tianshan to the north.

With co-ethnics forming a large absolute majority in China, the Han of Xinjiang are often eager to communicate their distinct identity. History and geography have combined to produce local characteristics that can be markedly different from those of Han Chinese elsewhere in the country, in certain respects, at least. As a people of the Silk Road, their sense of place is more fluid, their commitment to openness more central, and their cultural traditions more hybrid. Almost without exception, they lay claim to a radical cosmopolitanism, comparable perhaps to that found among the citizens of China's great coastal metropolises, but turned towards a very different world of significant influences, within the region itself, outwards into Central Asia, and beyond.

Some of these influences, stretching both forwards and backwards, are easy to identify. For instance, the Han people of Xinjiang have their own distinctive pattern of speech, something between a patois and a dialect, called Xinjiang Zahua. This local variant of the Chinese language is not far removed from standard Mandarin, because it serves as a common linguistic bond among people from many different parts of the country, but it is clearly inflected by the regional speech of Gansu, Qinghai, and Shaanxi, from which many

migrants have originated. It also incorporates elements from Central Asian minority languages. No less obviously, local agricultural traditions have affected diet and taste, promoting wheat-based staples – noodles and bread – at the expense of rice.

Unmistakably Han, yet also unmistakably different, the Xinjiang Han have been oriented by the Silk Road to look west, and onwards, to the opportunities presented by distant contacts and horizons. The molding forces of intimate locality and historical continuity, as exemplified by the resilient attachment to a familiar ‘home town’ (Laojia), so culturally decisive throughout most of China, have been correspondingly diminished among them.

These differences are illustrated by the small town of Qitai, located to the east of Urumqi. Evidence of Han settlement in the area dates back even beyond the Han Dynasty, to the Qin Dynasty of the late 3rd century BC. The town’s most venerable temple, the Dongdi Damiao, contains two trees planted by Daoist monks from Shandong Province 700 years ago. Yet the heritage of Qitai belongs indisputably to the Silk Road. The most characteristic structures are old guild houses (Huigang) which merchant communities from various towns and provinces erected as meeting places and cultural centers, way-stations between a distant origin and an equally distant destination. During the period of Qitai’s greatest flourishing during the Qing Dynasty, when it was one of the four main commercial centers in the region, no less than 60 of these magnificent buildings existed there. The continuity they attest to is one of flows, mingling, and connections, with traditions of hospitality, exchange, uprooting, and adventure. Overwhelming evidence shows that the Xinjiang Han long had a place in this area, but it is a place of a special kind, and not one that the rest of China easily understands.

As in the American ‘Wild West’, there was even a gold rush to attract the adventurous. Mummified bodies from the early 19th century have been found together with their mining tools and prospecting licenses, adding a further dramatic dimension to the image of Xinjiang as a land of opportunity, drawing people to its Jinshandao or ‘gold mountain trail’. Unsurprisingly, the region’s many excellent museums

overflow with invaluable coin collections – signs of an influence that is dynamic, enriching, and cross-cultural, closer to a river than a reservoir, and difficult to quite pin down.

Musical Clues

Both traditional and modern musical tastes provide valuable clues about the culture of the Xinjiang Han. Whether found among the old or young, those of conservative inclinations or the avant garde, musical preferences reveal an informative complexion of distinctions and connections.

The pre-eminent traditional music of the Xinjiang Han is Quzi, a local opera style, performed in dialect (Xinjiang Zahua), and betraying strong Gansu influence. Formally, each Quzi is divided into two-parts, the first sung and the second spoken. Unlike most Chinese opera, the viewpoint is not dramatic, but narrative – based on story-telling rather than re-enactment (“he said” and “she said” explanations are included in the work). The length of a piece can vary greatly, from just 10 minutes to as much as four hours. Groups of local people, typically elderly, can often be found performing Quzi in public parks. In addition to Xinjiang Quzi, traditional musical forms from neighboring provinces -- Shaanxi Qinqiang, Henan Yu opera, and Qinghai Hua’er – are also very popular.

If traditional music says much about where the Xinjiang Han have come from, and how they have adapted, modern music says no less about the connections they project forward. Whilst sung in Xinjiang Zahua, the local pop music is typically rhythmically and instrumentally hybrid, absorbing sounds from deeper into Central Asia, and departing from Chinese pop norms through its greater emphasis on beat, discordance, and humor. The future of the region, it suggests adamantly, is going to include a lot of fun.